



The Search for Faith

by Professor David Frost

Introduction: 'The Way'

I have the pleasure of welcoming you all to the first of twelve sessions of 'The Way'. 'The Way' is the very first name given to what we know as 'Christianity'. When Saul (who later became St Paul), only some three years or so after the execution of Jesus, got permission from the Jewish leaders to arrest and imprison followers of this Jesus, he went after 'any belonging to the Way' (The Acts of the Apostles 9:2). Later, when he had become a Christian himself, he defended his new belief before the Roman Governor Felix, saying 'according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers' (Acts 24:14).

'The Way' is a road some of you are already well started on. Others of you may have got well down the Way and then hit a road-block, something you now want to get beyond. Others again may have friends you'd like to introduce to the Way – but you don't know how to go about it. Yet others among you may be looking around at the entrance to the Way, wondering if there's anything there for you.

'The Way' is a way to go: a way to live your life so that you find meaning, fulfilment, joy and peace. It's a way to make sense of life, of people, of the world we live in, of who we are and where we are headed. The film-maker Federico Fellini described our grim situation in the modern age: 'Men today seem to be in a rowing boat without oars in an ocean without shores' – or to put it in a popular phrase: 'We're up a creek, without a paddle'. But we of the Way say: 'We know where to row; we have found some oars; and we are making towards the shore of our dreams'.

How can we possibly be so sure? We have a Teacher: the one person in human history whom we believe had the answers. In fact, he's on record as saying not just that he knew the way and had the answers, but that he *was* the Way, he *was* the answer. Jesus said to Thomas:

'I am the way, the truth, and the life'.
(John 14:6)

We believe that Jesus Christ knows where and how we should go, that he is our inspiration on the journey, that he feeds, guides and directs us as we go, that he is the friend we travel with, and also the lover who awaits us at the end.

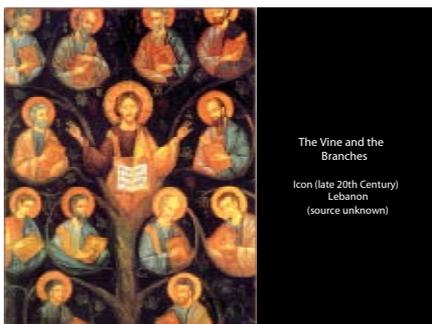
Introduction to the Course

It's a fair question to ask 'How can you possibly believe such a thing?' All of our twelve sessions will be given to answering that question. This session in particular is directed to 'The Search for Faith'. Nothing will save you from the moment of choice when you have

to decide what to believe, for neither we nor anyone else can offer cast-iron proofs. The whole of life requires faith: you can't walk down the street without the faith that the people you meet are not out to kill you. You can't be certain: but past experience, what the people you trust tell you, can make you feel reasonably sure you will be safe. So with the Way: there isn't 100% proof but there are millions who have gone that Way safely and know it works – and there is also your own experience. It is possible to be reasonably sure. But you will never arrive at reasonable certainty unless you are prepared to ask questions. That is what this course is about. Each session will begin with a presentation by a single speaker; then we will divide into small groups for discussion, under the guidance of a group leader. And the basic principle of those discussion groups is that anything may be said, anything questioned. And no question – and certainly no person – will ever be treated as foolish.

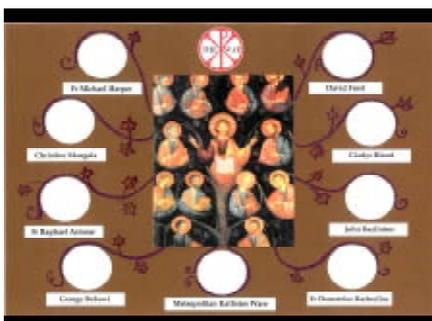
C.S. Lewis (author of the Narnia stories) once said that Christianity is caught by 'good infection' – we get it from other people. That is why our 'fun-time' together here, the friends we make, our discussions, our private chats, our cups of tea or coffee together, our final meal, will be so important. We have a 'good infection' we want you to catch. And in the same way as you get courage to walk down the street because people you trust – your parents, friends, teachers – told you it was safe, so you get power to believe by trusting people whom you've learned to rely on.

The Orthodox Church likes to teach as much by pictures as by words, through what we call icons: pictures which are not naturalistic but carry a message.



*Visual Aid 1:
Icon of the Vine and Branches*

Here is what we might call 'The Tree of Faith'. It comes from a saying of Jesus to his followers: 'I am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15:5). As I said, it is not naturalistic: you never heard of a man growing out of a plant, except in science fiction. But the picture tells important truths. Here is Jesus, the Vine; and growing from him are his fruit: the disciples who tell of him and his teaching – four of them by writing the Gospels. Beyond them, we can see the tendrils stretching out to those whom the disciples will teach, who also tell others, who will tell still more – and here



*Visual Aid 2:
The Extended Vine*

– here on the outer fringe, but still linked to the Vine, are your nine designers of this course: two thousand years from Jesus, but connected up as teachers of the Way by direct personal contact, right back to the centre of the Vine, Jesus himself. Top left is Fr Michael Harper, once an Anglican priest and a major figure in the pentecostal revival, first Dean of the British Antiochian Orthodox community. Below him is Christine Mangala Frost, a scholar and a novelist, and an adult convert from an ancient Hindu family. One down is Fr Raphael Armour, once a businessman, now for many years much-loved parish priest of St Ephraim's, Cambridge, in the Russian diocese of Sourozh. At bottom left we have Dr George Bebawi, born a Jew in Egypt, converted to Christianity at the age of eighteen, a Cambridge University PhD in theology, serving first the Coptic Church and becoming Russian Orthodox after arriving in England, where he served as first Director of Studies at the Orthodox Institute in Cambridge. On the right-hand side, bottom, we have Fr Demetrios Bathrellos, a distinguished theologian and patristics scholar from the Greek Orthodox Church. Above him is the late John Bazlinton, a gifted artist and a dedicated member of the congregation of the Russian Cathedral in London. Next above, we have Gladys Bland, an Antiochian Orthodox, a historian by training, for many years headmistress of a major girls' high school, now Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Orthodox Institute. Top right is Professor David Frost, Shakespearean scholar, writer, liturgist and translator of the Psalms, now Principal of the Cambridge Institute. And finally – bottom-centre and supporting us all – is Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, perhaps the foremost Orthodox scholar of the English-speaking world, who has guided us in producing this course and approved what we say as being a faithful account of what Orthodox Christians believe. We are of various ages, from either sex, from extraordinarily varied backgrounds, nationalities and life-experiences: but we all of us testify that what each of us says is the faith of us all. As the evangelicals put it: 'We all sing from the same hymn-sheet'.

'But why', you may ask, 'don't we see your faces, only your names?' That is because, unlike the saints who surround Christ in the icon, we haven't yet received our full and perfect form. We are still on the Way, still being changed, still awaiting our glorified bodies. St Paul says that, when we die, we are like seed put in the ground: only when we are resurrected to life will you see us as we were meant to be.

This Vine is also an image of the Orthodox Church: an unbroken chain of followers of Christ, all of us linked back to the earliest beginnings of Christianity, without breaks or gaps. Note also another meaning of the picture: we not only go back to Jesus as our beginning but we are still kept going by his life, his 'sap', which flows out along the branches to us. We are nourished by his Spirit and by his Body and Blood which comes to us through the eucharist. Notice also that all the branches are alive and in contact with one another, even through two thousand years: that is what is meant by the Body of Christ and the Communion of Saints, whether living in this world or in the next. Or to put it another way, we are all of us grapes on an enormous Vine which is Jesus.

One last thing about the presenters. We teach the Way because, however different we are, in age, in sex, in situation, profession or personality, we all believe it to be true. We can all witness that it has transformed, and directed, and enthused our lives. We want to bring this knowledge to you, not because we are being paid (none of us are) or because we want

to make money from you like some tele-evangelist, but because we feel compelled. Like St Paul, we have to tell everyone that we know God as Love through his Son Jesus Christ, and that the life which flows through our veins comes directly from him, and is wonderful.

The Search for Faith

People say that faith is difficult. It is certainly true that belief in anything more than what we see, hear and touch is harder in a modern world where we have been bamboozled by a false doctrine of 'scientific materialism': a teaching which claims (quite contrary to the truth as honest scientists understand it) that 'science' has somehow 'proved' that matter is all that exists, that there is no such thing as 'spirit', that 'love' is only animal lust, and that death is the end of our existence. But faith in Christianity isn't really much more difficult than it has always been. The central Christian message – that someone called Jesus, who had been killed, came back to life – has always been contrary to human experience, then and now. When St Paul tried to tell the Greeks of Athens about the new Way to God, they listened up to the point where he started to speak about resurrection from the dead – whereupon, we are told, 'some mocked' (Acts 17:32) and the meeting broke up. –Hardly surprising, for such a thing goes against all common sense. Worshipping an executed criminal who came back from the dead has always been 'folly to the Gentiles' (the outsiders), as St Paul put it when he was writing his First Letter to the Corinthians (1:23).

Nevertheless, I'm going to say something strange: that we all of us, believers or non-believers, live by faith – by which I mean that we trust in something or someone when we cannot be one hundred percent sure. That is true not just of having the courage to walk down the street in the faith that people won't attack you. It applies to the major things in life. We know that it requires faith to believe that God exists, that he created a world that is good, and that we survive our physical death. BUT it also requires faith to believe that God does not exist, that the world is a hard and meaningless place, and that death is the end. Both cannot be true – and the choice as to which we believe will alter everything we feel, or think, or say, or do.

Now I'm not saying that unbelief makes just as good sense as belief. Pretty well everyone admits that human beings seem programmed to look for meaning, that they long to make sense of things, great or small. The great advantage of a belief-system is that it meets that need. The unbeliever, in refusing God as an explanation, has to accept that there is no meaning, that life is absurd, that nothing ultimately makes sense. That is hard to live with and hard to maintain.

But the chief problem we all face is not the difficulty of believing in something but of sticking with it. We wobble, we veer, we switch between beliefs that can't both be true. On a fine summer's day I believe with the poet Robert Browning that 'God's in his heaven - All's right with the world' [*Songs from "Pippa Passes", I*]. Give me one touch of flu, and I feel God doesn't exist, the world is a rotten, meaningless place, I'm going to die for ever – and I don't even care.

Doubt, then, is inescapable, whoever you are. None of us can avoid the 'wobbles'. That applies to unbelievers as much as to Christians. My own mother rejected Christian belief, thinking death was the end of us – but as she got older, she started to panic in case death wasn't the end. C.S. Lewis confesses in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* that, after he

became a Christian, he began to have days when the whole thing seemed most improbable. This was a great worry – until he remembered that, when he was an atheist, he had days when Christianity looked horribly believable. You can't avoid having faith in something, whether in God or in there not being a God – or perhaps you have faith in yourself, in friends, lovers, family, in pleasure, money, possessions. But whatever it is that you believe in, you are bound sometimes to doubt whether what you've put your trust in is reliable.

Yet the whole human race longs for something reliable – something you can believe in all the time. We search for meaning in the world, and in our own lives. We want to know who we are and what it is that will give us permanent satisfaction. We want to see things whole – and Christianity gives us a sense of a unity that none of the alternatives can. It was the need for something to trust in, something that would explain and permanently satisfy, that led this country to Christianity in the first place. The historian known as the Venerable Bede recounts how the Roman missionary bishop Paulinus converted King Edwin of Northumbria in AD 625. The King summoned a council of his chief men to consider what Paulinus had to say about Jesus Christ. The chief of the pagan priests, one Coifi, was asked for his opinion, and complained that the pagan gods had not proved 'good for anything'. Another chief observed: 'It seems to me, my King, that if you put our present life on earth against the time that we know nothing about, it is as if you were sitting at a feast with your chief men and thanes (⌈that is, his knights⌋) in the winter-time. The fire burns, the hall is warm, but outside it rains and snows and storms. A sparrow flies through the house, coming in at one door and going out at another. For a minute he is not touched by the storm, but that minute is only the flash of an eye, a fragment of time, and soon he is gone, from winter into winter again. So our life appears for a brief space: but as for what went before and what comes after, we know nothing.' Because the new Way proposed to tell Coifi what went before and what comes after, the chief priest then jumped upon his horse and, spear in hand, went to destroy the altars of the idols he had served so long.

What we are looking for is not something that will just give explanations to the head; we want something that will satisfy the longings of the heart. I guess you, like me, have longed for all sorts of things. When I was about twelve, I longed for a little hand-operated printing press called an Adana. I entered a competition in which the prize was an Adana; day after day I waited for the postman, every night I prayed to God to allow me to win. I thought my whole happiness depended on that printing press. I imagined myself printing boy-scout newspapers on it, I read the advertisement again and again to try and discover more about what it could do. I didn't win – but since then I've had several printing machines, I've printed books, pamphlets, posters and magazines. It's all right: I enjoy book design and printing – but it isn't quite what I was hoping for. There's a longing that isn't satisfied – and going into colour and graphics programmes and scanners has done nothing to cure the ache.

The ache goes on, even if what we think might be the cure changes. The longing drives us to pile up material possessions: maybe if I had the latest suit from Christian Dior I'd feel good, beautiful, happy, content. But we learn, and probably sooner rather than later, the truth of what the Bible says, that 'Man cannot live by bread alone' – material things, possessions, food, drink, alcohol, drugs, sex, may dull the longing for a moment but it keeps coming back, worse than before. And if you try and get satisfaction from such things, you

start to feel sick in a part of yourself you hardly knew was there: 'For what will it profit a man,' Jesus asks, 'if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?' (Matthew 16:26).

Probably you, like me, have turned to people, to love, to fill the hole. In a way, you could say we are on the right track. At about the same time as I was dreaming of owning an Adana, I had this fantasy that I sent myself to sleep thinking about, of a little sister I would spend my time looking after. She was very pretty (naturally) but also what one might call 'high maintenance': she was easily frightened and always seemed to be in tears; and night after night I'd be comforting her, drying her eyes, telling her not to be frightened – till I dropped off to sleep. More important than being loved is being able to love – and just to dream about caring for someone did something to soothe the longing in my heart. Now I'm married to the girl of my dreams (though she isn't always in tears!). Yet though my wife is more important to me than everything else except my God, there is still that ache remaining: I long for something more, more even than what I have.

Christians have an explanation for this longing for we know not what, this aching hole in the middle of us. It is what a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, called 'the God-shaped gap'. Hundreds of years before Christ, the writer of the Psalms knew about it: 'My soul is thirsty,' he says in Psalm 42 [*Septuagint 41*], 'thirsty for the living God'. The western Saint Augustine, some four hundred years after the birth of Jesus, who had tried many of the satisfactions of the world, wrote out of hard experience: 'Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee' – that is, till they find God. Christians say that we have been built to want, need, search after, find and love God and know ourselves loved by Him – and our ache will go on until we see Him face to face.

I tried to use this argument, that human beings have an emptiness in their hearts that only God can fill, to convince the most die-hard atheist I've ever met, my Cambridge Director of Studies. 'Oh, isn't it just wish-fulfilment?' he said. 'Human beings want security, permanence, to love and be loved, to have meaning in their lives – so they dream up a God to give them what they want.' For once, I managed a reply. 'You get thirsty,' I said, 'you long to drink. Now it would be daft to say that water was a fantasy, just because you wanted it so badly. That we have such a strange longing for something we don't know, a longing no one can explain how we got, might be a very good reason for thinking that the Living Water, the God we are looking for, really does exist.'

How do we find that God? The Gospels speak of a hidden treasure, a 'pearl of great value' that is there to be sought after and found – something you'd give up everything else so as to possess (Matthew 13:44-46). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says that we must start with a willingness to trust: 'For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him' (Hebrews 11:6).

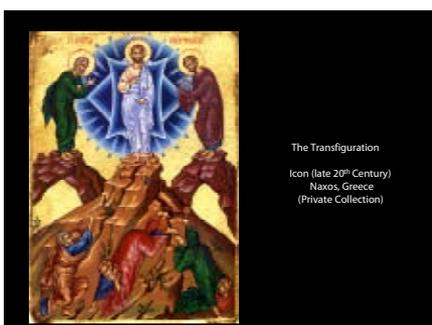
But God hasn't left us on our own, trying to work up enough trust in his existence to be able to go looking for him. Uniquely among the world religions, Christianity believes in a God who comes looking for us, long before we start searching for him. Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son, an image of a human being wandering from God to pursue his own pleasures. The Prodigal gets sick of his degraded existence and decides to go back home: 'but while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him' (Luke 15:11-32). Our need for God is met while we are still on the road.

God comes to us in ways that we sometimes do not recognize. The Orthodox Church teaches that God is vastly beyond what we could understand: our minds can never comprehend him. But our hearts and feelings can be touched, almost as a baby knows and feels the love of its parent without ‘understanding’ him or her. What we call the ‘energies’ of God reach out to us – and often through the things he has created. Human life seems to be full of signals from beyond, of sudden, unexplainable experiences of being ‘surprised by joy’, to use an expression of the poet Wordsworth that C.S. Lewis took up as the title for the story of his life. You see a person, or a landscape or a creature in the natural world, or you hear a piece of music or see a work of art – and the sheer beauty or awesomeness or power of it hits you like an electric force, so that you feel inexplicably happy, joyful, awed, even humbled. Or you fall in love with someone, and they and the whole world are transformed. The Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote that ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’. It has an electric charge from the Creator who made it and who holds each living thing in its own special shape and form. At certain moments, that power will leap out and strike you, so that you feel you have seen or heard or appreciated something for what it really is, and for the first time. What you are responding to, Hopkins would say, is the nature of God expressed in what he has made. And though lovers disappoint us – because they are fallible human beings like us – what we saw, which seemed more loveable than anything else I have been talking about, was real. We thought that person wonderful because they were not only made by God but made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). How could we not fall in love with what is the image of the divine?

But the Christian God has done more than send us contact-messages about himself through what he has created, or even through human beings who love us and so convince us that love is real and that God is like that. We believe that God reached out to us by sending a unique man, Jesus Christ, who was not only a man but the perfect image of what God was like – indeed, he was God. ‘No one has ever seen God’ says the Gospel of John, ‘the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known’ (John 1:18).

Most of us come slowly to seeing Jesus Christ as God. I remember, as a boy, being attracted by the stories Jesus told: they fascinated me, though some frightened me and some even moved me to tears. As a young man, I thought (as my second son thinks now) that Jesus ‘was a good man, and he had a lot of the right ideas’. Only by degrees did I come to feel that that wasn’t enough. It didn’t make sense, it didn’t fit the facts: if Jesus Christ was a man, he was also more than man.

The moment when we recognize Christ as God differs for each one of us. I want to finish by showing you another icon: not this time a picture with a message but an illustration of an episode in Jesus’ life when certain of his disciples realized that what they were dealing with went far beyond anything they had known before. This is the episode of the Transfiguration. Here is the icon



The Transfiguration
Icon (late 20th Century)
Naxos, Greece
(Private Collection)

Visual Aid 3: Icon of the Transfiguration

and here is St Mark's account of what happened.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. (Mark 9:2-8).

We cannot know exactly what happened: we have only the disciples' account, written down later by their disciples. But it is clearly a moment something like those others I have talked about, where the world we thought we knew suddenly seems very different, the familiar becomes strangely beautiful, we are moved with joy, and awe, even fear, as what seems to be the power of God breaks through to us and everything is changed.

The three disciples suddenly saw the teacher whom they thought they knew transfigured, as the Son of God, as God himself. They saw what God is; but because Jesus is also a man, they also saw what they could be. They too, though they may well have been limited, mean-minded, quarrelsome little men, could be transformed into the likeness of God, if they followed this God-Man wherever he led. All the dreams we have ever had, of being someone, of mattering, of being great and good and beautiful and loved and loving, of being at peace and satisfied, could all be fulfilled.

That is the point to which we say the Way leads. But to know if it is true, you have to give it a try. Knowledge about God is useless in itself: you have to experience him. That means experiencing Jesus Christ, for though Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life', he said in the next phrase 'no one comes to the Father, but by me' (John 14:6). 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating', as the proverb says. 'Give it a go, give it a whirl' is the modern way of putting it. The Psalmist, two and a half thousand years ago, invited us to 'taste and see': 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' (Psalm 34:8) [Septuagint 33:8]. To taste the Lord you've got to get to know him or to know him better – and that is what this course is all about. When, according to the Gospel of John (1:43-46), Philip had been called by Jesus, he went to Nathanael and told him they had found Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah that Moses and the prophets had foretold. Nathanael turned up his nose: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (It's rather like us saying 'Can anything remarkable come out of Luton?' – or any other grotty town you can think of). 'Philip said to him, "Come and see."' That is our invitation to you all over the next few weeks: 'Come and see'.

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